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ABSTRACT

This paper claims that preparation programs in educational administration do not prepare principals for the challenges they will face in their schools. Such programs do not address the real-life situations in which principals find themselves, and internships are typically insufficient in helping future leaders hone their skills. The essay states that prospective principals need a "leadership practice field" in which a bridge is created between performance and practice. Such practice fields allow the aspiring principal to gain experience without having to worry about failure. They allow school leaders to learn how to handle phone calls from irate parents before actually having to do so. It allow leaders to connect what they conceptually believe is the right course of action to what they choose to do under real circumstances. One such practice-field program that was required for 225 master's students preparing for the principalship is described. In the program, the students were given various scenarios, such as talking with a student reporting sexual advances by a classroom teacher, and were then offered feedback on how they handled the situation. Practice programs, it is claimed, focus on what principals will actually do in a given circumstance, rather than what they might do. (Contains 13 references.) (RJM)

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TOWARDS A LEADERSHIP PRACTICE FIELD: AN ANTIDOTE TO AN AILING INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

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Symposium

From Faith-Based Management to Flow: Opening the Managerial Medicine Chest to Inquiry and Scrutiny

Fenwick English, Chair

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Prologue

He just completed a master's degree in educational administration from a California university, after many years of classroom teaching at various grade levels. The position confronting him was a principalship in a K-8 district in Central California. He was looking forward to participating in the instructional leadership duties so emphasized in his principal preparation program, along with site-budgeting, curriculum planning, technology implementation, and working with the State's assessment of academic achievement. The challenges faced during the first six months of the principalship were far-removed from his expected responsibilities.

First, after three days on the job, was an incident which involved three high school part-time employees in the physical education department found drinking "Gin & Tonics" while life-guarding elementary students at the pool. Complicating the issue was the fact that one of the high school employees was the daughter of the school's head secretary, a long-standing employee of the district, and who, coincidentally, was a member of a minority population in the district.

Second, after two weeks on the job, was a phone call from an irate parent who demanded the firing of a teacher who supposedly threw a butter knife across the room at a disruptive student. Third, and certainly not the last of unusual decisions faced by this new principal, was the issuance of a grievance filed against him by a classified employee who charged that the principal helped paint parking lot lines on the faculty parking lot the day before school began, which

violated district policy stating administrators were not permitted to perform maintenance-related activities.

Somehow, over the next six years, this principal managed to deal with such as the above mentioned issues, but not without much difficulty, stress, confusion, and sleepless nights. Though perhaps not the only reason, this situation certainly contributed to the principal's decision to move on to another career.

Obviously, this principal's university preparation did very little to prepare him for such unanticipated responsibilities. But in retrospect, the principal could have benefited from an opportunity to "practice" some of the skills necessary to handle such issues. For example, he finally became proficient at handling irate parent phone calls – but only with scars and bruises encountered in the *performance field.* He thought, " If I only had an opportunity to *practice* a bit before thrown into the performance field."

Introduction

The field of educational leadership has long been criticized for the ways in which men and women are prepared for school leadership positions. In 1960, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) characterized the preparation of superintendents and principals as a "dismal montage" (Murphy, 1999, p. 84). Later, Farquhar and Piele (1972) described university-based preparation programs as "dysfunctional structural incrementalism" (p.17). In 1990, Pitner discussed the "zombie programs" (p. 131) in educational administration.

As recently as 1999, McCarthy addressed the issue of change in education administration by stating, "congeniality and complacency are woven into educational

administration programs and the majority of faculty do not perceive a need for radical change that would bring about a transformation in education leadership" (p. 209). Now, forty years later, Murphy (2001) points to the profession's continued focus on technical knowledge placing the University in the center of the field, and posits "trying to link theory and practice in school administration has been for the last 30 years a little like attempting to start a car with a dead battery: The odds are fairly long that the engine will ever turn over" (p. 5). Murphy identifies the central problem as our fascination with building an academic infrastructure of school administration , which has produced serious distortions in what is primarily an applied field.

Education leadership has long been characterized by a "disconnect between what is taught in university preparation programs and what practitioners need to be able to do in their schools and districts" (Cambron-McCabe, 1999: cited in Young, Petersen, & Short, 2001, p. 11). Though much of the reform movement consistently includes the call for closing the gap between theory and practice, the question still remains: Has any movement toward this goal occurred (Creighton, 2001; English, 2000; McCarthy, 1999; Murphy, 2001)?

The traditional internship presently serves as the vehicle for aspiring principals to practice their problem-solving and instructional leadership skills. Though there has been recent emphases from the professional organizations (AASA, NAESP, NASSP, UCEA, NCPEA) for extending the internship experience over more time (e.g., one-year) and weaving the internship throughout preparation coursework, the internship still remains a weak experience and inappropriate "practice field," at best.

Education Leadership Practice Fields

For some time, I have argued for the implementation of a "leadership practice field" into our preparation programs. The conceptual notion at work here, is that of creating a bridge between a *performance field* (working in the system) and a *practice*

field (working on the system). This model is based on the work of Daniel Kim, a colleague of Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline*) and co-founder of the MIT Organizational Learning Center, where he is currently director of the Learning Laboratory Research Project. The central idea is that a *leadership practice field* provides an environment in which a prospective leader can experiment with alternative strategies and policies, test assumptions, and practice working through the complex issues of school administration in a constructive and productive manner.

Kim is fond of using the following scenario as an introduction to the "practice field" concept:

> Imagine you are walking across a tightrope stretched between two skyscraper buildings in Chicago. The wind is blowing and the rope is shaking as you inch your way forward. One of your teammates sits in the wheel barrow you are balancing in front of you, while another colleague sits on your shoulders. There are no safety nets, no harnesses. You think to yourself, "one false move and the three of us will take an express elevator straight down to the street." Suddenly your trainer yells from the other side, "Try a new move! Experiment! Take some risks! Remember, you are a learning team!" (p. 353)

Kim continues by admitting the ludicrous nature of this scenario, but emphasizes that this is precisely what many companies expect their management teams to do – experiment and learn in an environment that is risky, turbulent, and unpredictable. And unlike a high-wire act or sports team, management teams do not have a practice field; they are nearly always on the performance field.

I suggest that this scenario truly resembles the life of school principals, and the concept of a *practice field* is applicable to the field of education administration and especially its preparation programs. Except for a brief experience with some form of internship, notoriously considered weak (Murphy & Forsyth, 1999) and suffering from a

lack of quality and relevance (Creighton & Jones, 2001), where do prospective school leaders get an opportunity to leave the day-to-day pressures of school administration temporarily, and enter a different kind of space where they can practice and learn?

Practicing principals in the field continue to tell us that what they do in their daily lives as school administrators has little resemblance to their preparation received at the university. They also share their frustration with no time to be proactive: They are constantly required to be reactive. Principals have little time and even less opportunity to practice their skills in "safe-failing" places. Even finding time for reflection is difficult in the non-stop hectic pace of a principal's day.

I can think of no other profession that does not value and provide opportunities for new professionals to practice: in a different kind of space where one can practice and learn. The medical profession has a "practice field," the legal profession has a "practice field," musicians and dancers have a "practice field," the New York Nicks have a "practice field," pilots and astronauts have a "practice field," and on and on…but do we really have a practice field in school administration? I argue not – and the internship, as we know it, is a sorry excuse for one. Murphy and Forsyth (1999) reported that although supervised practice could be the most critical phase of the administrator's preparation, the component is notoriously weak. Along with other education leaders (Griffiths, 1998; Milstein, 1990), Murphy claimed that field-based practices do not involve an adequate number of experiences and are arranged on the basis of convenience.

Even the experience of student teaching we require of prospective teachers offers more opportunity to practice than does the typical administrative internship. First of all, their experience involves full-time participation – one cannot work in any other job or environment. At most, additional responsibilities for the teacher candidate includes an additional course designed to augment the internship experience. Principal internships, on the other hand, coexist with another job and responsibilities: usually a classroom

teaching position. Unless the candidate is a practicing administrator (which is very rare) such as a vice-principal, they are required to hold down a regular classroom teaching position while *practicing* the role and responsibilities of a school principal. This situation mostly results in one of two scenarios: (a) the internship experience takes place after hours – before or after the regular school day – usually in an environment void of students and other faculty, and or (b) assigned duties and experiences are generally related to bookkeeping tasks (e.g., attendance or program evaluations, at best). These scenarios place our aspiring principals in an environment absent of any opportunity to practice and learn: they are nearly always on the performance field.

A *practice field* can be viewed as a leader's equivalent to the practice field of sports teams, doctors, lawyers, and artists. No musician or professional athlete would dare to immediately and without an enormous amount of practice, immerse him or herself into the performance field. The goal of a practice field is to provide a "real" enough practice field so that the lessons are meaningful but "safe" enough to provide an environment in which a leader can experiment with alternative policies and programs, "try out" assumed practices, and "experiment" with alternative strategies. *Try a new move! Experiment! Take some risks! Remember, you are a learning team!*

A Practice Field Further Defined

Several have suggested we need to view leadership more as a performing art rather than as a specific set of skills, competencies, and knowledge (Sarason, 1999; Vail, 1989). When practicing a symphony, the orchestra has the ability to *slow down* the tempo in order to practice certain sections. A medical student in residence has the opportunity to *slow down* and practice certain medical diagnoses or procedures. The New York Nicks spend most of their time in a *practice field*, slowing down the tempo, and practicing certain moves, strategies, and assumptions. And all of these practice fields exist in an environment with opportunities for making mistakes, in a "safe-failing space

to enhance learning" (Kim, 1995, p. 353). When and where does the aspiring (or practicing) principal get a chance to *slow down* and practice certain moves or aspects of their job in schools?

Similar to a pilot's flight simulator, a leadership practice field puts prospective principals in control of a realistic activity (e.g., an irate phone call from a parent). The purpose is to place the aspiring principal in a simulated environment in which they can learn from experience in a controlled setting. They are in charge of making key decisions similar to the ones they will make in their schools. New strategies and practices can be tested, followed by immediate reflection on the result or outcome, accompanied by immediate support and feedback from others. Learning is enhanced by shortening the delay between the decision and the result. In the case of the "irate parent call," the candidate receives immediate feedback if he or she displayed insensitivity to parent concerns or a lack of appropriate listening skills. Aspiring principals begin to understand the underlying forces that produce a particular result or outcome.

Argyris and Schoen (1978) in their book, *Organizational Learning*, posit that leaders function with a gap between their conceptual belief of the right course of action and what they actually choose to do in the real situation. Not choosing to narrow or close these gaps can have two effects: (a) prohibit actual learning and (b) sustain the existing irrelevancy between principal preparation programs and effective leadership in the field. A leadership practice field can help identify and close such gaps. Here lies one of the most important reasons for leadership practice fields: Prospective school leaders are provided opportunities to connect what they conceptually believe is the right course of action to what they choose to do under real circumstances. Practicing such behaviors away from the day-to-day stresses of the job increases the likelihood of making the right decisions in the real school environment.

A Leadership Practice Field in Action

A leadership practice field was a required component of the principal preparation program at a mid-western university from Fall semester 1997 through Spring semester 2000. During that time, a total of 225 master's students preparing for the principalship participated in the practice field. Though the process was used in this case as a way to identify strengths and weaknesses of enrolled candidates, the intent of this paper is to suggest and recommend that leadership practice fields be implemented in education administration preparation programs as a strategy to complement other internship experiences.

As part of the course entitled "The Principalship," students were required to attend a full-day (Saturday) session consisting of a variety of behavior-based activities. No individual names were used during the day; students began the day as a hypothetical principal and were identified only by a number (e.g., A-1, A-2, A-3, etc.). Activities were scheduled in several rooms and individual offices, and in a manner whereby each student progressed through the activities during the day.

Evaluators and judges were practicing teachers, principals, superintendents, university professors, and students. Each candidate's performance was judged and reviewed by at least three evaluators. Activities included: (a) talking with a student reporting sexual advances by a classroom teacher, (b) reporting to the Board of Education on declining test scores, (c) addressing the teachers' union on budgetary constraints, and (d) meeting an intoxicated father in the office who is demanding to take his Kindergarten son out of school. The following example of a leadership practice field used during 1997-2000 comes from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management's Project-Based Learning Project (Bridges, 1994).

Irate Parent Phone Call

Students answered a phone call from an angry parent at scheduled times in a location previously announced (e.g., private office). Evaluators performed the role of the irate parent making the call from another office, and accompanied by two additional evaluators. The parent script follows:

You are Mr. Robert Wills and want your son transferred out of Mrs. Jones' room.

Your son is Joe, an 8th grader.

You have aspirations for him to attend college and it is important that he do well in school and learn.

Your son Joe is not learning anything in Mrs. Jones' class – it is a total waste of time.

You want your son transferred to Mrs. Johnson; Joe likes her and learned a lot from her when he had her last year.

There must be other parents who feel the same way – have you heard from any of them? What are you going to do about it?

Indicate you don't care if the principal denies the request.

Your son Joe is a special case, and the principal better reconsider.

If he doesn't transfer Joe, he will hear from you. You mean business.

And you intend to talk with the Board President and Superintendent.

The candidate's responses are listened to on a speaker phone allowing the evaluators to hear the conversation. Both the irate parent and the candidate are in the privacy of individual offices, and the candidate is in no way identified by name. How is the candidate's audition evaluated?

The evaluation form consists of administrative constructs and descriptors taken from NAESP, NASSP, and NPBEA assessment documents used in professional assessment center simulations. A completed assessment form used in the irate parent phone call audition is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Irate Parent Call Assessment Form

Student Identification Number_____A-1_____

Communication "look-fors"	1	2	3	4	5
Conveys ideas and opinions succinctly			X		
Expresses clear and concise language			X		
Checks for understanding		X			
Uses appropriate language			X		
Exhibits sensitivity to parent's concerns		X			
Renders a timely and appropriate decision		X			
Displays appropriate listening skills		X			

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

1. Appeared in a hurry to get the parent off the phone.

2. Be careful about putting the responsibility on the parent to check these issues out – that's why he's calling you.

3. Be more explicit about what steps you will take.

4. Strive to show empathy to the parent and at the same time be supportive of the teacher.

Note: The administrator constructs and descriptors listed above are to be used as "look-fors" as the activity unfolds. Additional comments will help with the assessment of the individual. Observation should be rated on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating little evidence and 5 representing strong evidence.

Discussion

The important issue, as with any professional practice field, is not a perfect performance necessarily, but whether or not the candidate can practice what is required in the handling of an irate parent phone call. You will notice that additional comments focus on constructive criticism and allow the candidate to reflect on areas of improvement. The assessment obviously involves subjective decisions by the evaluators. These decisions, however, are based on many years of experience of practicing teachers, administrators, and university faculty. The point is that our profession is currently depending excessively on theoretical and non-behavioral based preparation of school principals. Sarason (1999) argues that preparing teachers and principals with an over-emphasis on non-behavioral based criteria is not justifiable on moral and educational grounds. He continues by making an analogy to the performing arts: "If you want to predict who will make a good actor, you have to see them act, keeping in mind that you are observing an amateur" (p. 99).

The real strength of leadership practice fields is that they provide an opportunity (and perhaps more authentic) for prospective school leaders to practice an actual task from the school administrator's day. Our traditional preparation programs certainly address what a candidate "might do" in a particular situation, but leadership practice fields begin to focus on the issue of what the candidate "will actually do" in a real-life the situation.

We are beginning to view leadership less and less as consisting of quantifiable characteristics measured by non-behavioral based activities. Evidence continues to mount indicating educational administration is less objective and "more dependent on the comings and goings of personalities," says Gary Wills (1994) in his best-selling book, Certain Trumpets, about the nature of leadership. If we desire to (and I suggest we must) narrow or close the existing gap between what happens in the principal preparation program and what actually happens in the school setting, we must provide more opportunities for prospective school principals to practice their skills where they can *slow down and work on certain sections.*

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